THE INCONGRUITY OF CALVARY
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John 19:17-30

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There was nothing very special about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. It happened every day. Rome ruled with a heavy hand and public executions were official policy, dramatic demonstrations of swift and terrible justice. There were other ways of doing it, of course, but crucifixion had certain advantages. For one thing it was a conspicuous and drawn-out method of execution and therefore a vivid object lesson for would-be breakers of Roman Law. For another, it was exceptionally cruel, not only in the terrible humiliation but also in the exquisite pain visited upon its victims. Having witnessed a crucifixion a man might think twice before running athwart of the establishment. Finally, it was really very easily and cheaply done. Two beams were lashed together and used over and over again. The victim was tied to the cross beam, the upright beam was inserted into a hole in the ground and the instrument raised vertically. The victim then was suspended by his wrists, in a position that very quickly caused excruciating pain. A strong man might last for days - depending on how much food and water were given to him. Death came slowly - usually by suffoc. ation caused by the rearrangement of the internal organs. Occasionally a victim might be nailed to a cross - as was the case with this Jesus of Nazareth. In any case, there he would hang, the target of ridicule and rebuke until life was choked out of him.

It was a common sight, and there was nothing very special about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. True - the Temple authorities were somehow mixed up in this one. He had caused some kind of religious stir and there were more onlookers than usual. True, it was the day before the Sabbath and certain measures had to be taken to insure that death occurred more rapidly. True, the city was crowded with Passover celebrants and the commotion was greater. But other than these few minor variables it was a rather routine crucifixion. It happened every day in Palestine, 33 A.D.

An objective historian, singling out this particular execution for analysis might come up with some preliminary observations that would sound like this. The event happened at a certain place, on a certain date - like many other similar events. It was the end of the line for one Jesus of Nazareth. It is a remarkable demonstration of how inhumanly evil men can be to their fellow men. It shows the pointlessness and meaninglessness of human life, for obviously this particular victim had done nothing to warrant taking his life. Life is like that - the innocent often come out on the bottom. It implies the non-existence of God, or at the very least, the powerlessness of God to do much about the human condition. For, if there is a God, how could he permit such a mammoth injustice to be perpetrated on any man, not to mention the one who claimed to be his son? Finally, the crucifixion proves that whatever Jesus was up to, he failed miserably. In fact, when one considers the things he said, and the things his friends claimed he did, he has to go down in the record as one of history's more colossal failures.

This - the unbiassed conclusion of an objective man, observing only the harsh reality of the crucifixion of Jesus who was called the Christ. You can't really argue with the logic of it - it's all there for any one to see, and the facts speak for themselves.

And yet the incongruity of it is that this isn't what the event means at all. The vulgar instrument on which it was performed is remembered, not as an item in a wax museum chamber of horrors, but because there is nowhere you can go on the face of the earth without seeing it. It's here in this building, and all over this city and throughout this nation, in cedar, walnut, bronze and silver, around millions of necks, over millions of hearts, in cemeteries, on hospitals, even on health insurance policies. There is no place in the world without some replica, some reminder, perhaps hidden away, but probably prominently displayed. There is a certain incongruity in that alone, in the simple fact that the rude instrument of Roman crucifixion is the one visible symbol which is present in every land.

But even more illogical is the strange way this particular cross, and this particular crucifixion, has exerted a compelling force on men for nearly two thousand years. Men have been moved and touched by this simple execution. Rather than being repelled by the bestiality of it all, millions upon millions of human beings have been pulled toward it. The rather common drama of that day long ago has somehow seemed to be relevant to all sorts and conditions of men: the cross draws into its drama all who pause even for a moment to reflect, so that we respond to it terribly emotionally - terribly personally.

The cross is all of that: the analysis of the objective historian is not complete - logical enough, but no more accurate than an attempt to express the nature of man in terms of the chemicals in his body. It doesn't make much sense, really, but then calvary is full of incongruities. It is to several of these - these logical inconsistencies that I would draw your attention.

First, there is the incongruity of time and space. It happened in the year 33 A.D. on the eve of the great Passover celebration. It happened outside the city of Jerusalem, near the garbage dump, on a hill called Golgotha. We have the time and place firmly fixed in our minds, and we remember this event in much the same manner as we remember other events in history. And yet, somehow, this event will not remain just one entry in the historical ledger. Somehow, strangely, this event transcends time and space and extends into every generation. The basic theological assumption of the Roman Catholic Mass is that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ happens again when Mass is celebrated. His sacrifice is repeated: he keeps suffering and dying. This is not our theology, but there is at least a great symbolic truth here, for the expressed feeling of countless Christians over the centuries has been that even though the crucifixion was a once-and-for-all thing, it does rise above the confines of history and become contemporary for every passer-by in every age.

The very moving Spiritual poses the question of the ages, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?". Of course we were not there and it is an incongruity to even ask that question. Think of the events that altered the course of history - the campaigns of Alexander the Great, the Assasination of Julius Caesar, the signing of the Magna Charta, the French Revolution: in recent times Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima. No one ever wrote a song which asked "Were you There when Thy Assasinated the Emperor?" or "Were you There When They Dropped the Bomb?". History on a grand scale - yes, but not history that transcends time and place. Yet, about the cross of Jesus Christ, the question has been asked, and always will be asked, "Were you There.....?", because in a very real sense we were there, and we are there. Harry Emerson Fosdick, writing about this strangeness in the crucifixion has observed that: "All the major factors in that tragedy involve you and me. The blindness of religious orders that cannot see a new and larger truth. The selfishness of a business community that does not want the profitable traffic in the temple courts disturbed. The disloyalty of Judas...: the political shrewdness of Pilate - the emotionalism of the crowd - the fearfulness of the disciples - who of us was not there?"

Thus the incongruity. The crowd long ago chose Barrabus, a murderer who had tried to start a revolution. This man they set free. But Jesus - the one who taught that it was better to love one's enemies, the one who picked broken lives up out of the gutter, healing them and making them whole - "Away with this man: crucify him!" That is not ancient history. You can't confine that event to a lonely hill outside Jerusalem, nor to a day in the year 33 A.D. That is a current event which happens in our lives, day after day.

The objective historian has observed that the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is a study of man at his demonic worst. It has been called the "towering crime of history": in the name of religion and patriotism he was executed; soldiers spat upon him and humiliated him; common, ordinary people jeered and mocked; one of his associates betrayed him. He died the loneliest and most pathetic of deaths. And

he was innocent; given all the forces aligned against him, his hurried and superficial trial still had to be stacked with paid witnesses for the prosecution. In this drama man comes out looking very badly, just as bad as he does as the deviser of Auschwitz or Buchenwald. There seems to be no limit to the insidious potential for evil in the heart of man. To that observation the crucifixion of Jesus Christ bears eloquent testimony.

And yet incongruity runs strongly here, too. For the cross, points not so much to the depravity of man as to his dignity and worth. Man, cries the New Testament, is the brother for whom Christ died. Man - individual men who hate and curse and spit and wallow in bigotry - for these men Christ died. As he hung there, he looked down at a pathetic little group of men, rolling dice for his garments. One of them had pressed a crown of thorns into his brow, another had driven the nails through his wrists, together they had bent their shoulders beneath the dead weight of the cross to put it in place. He looked down on these pathetic little men, and asked God to forgive them. This is what gives man dignity. In that act of forgiveness he was looking down on all men - little men caught up in their scheming and plotting, thoughtless men who know not what they do. He died - not for the sake of martyrdom - but the sake of humble, pitiful men. That is man's dignity. The cross is the symbol of this - in God's sight, men are worth dying for.

Obviously his friends and associates put a great deal of stock in his claim to be God's Messiah. He had come to them as prophet and rabbi, but gradually they had come to know him as Lord. Vaguely they began to sense that in his presence they were also in the presence of the Kingdom of God. Peter had blurted it out on one occasion: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God". On another occasion he told them that, having seen him, they had already seen the father. In a strange and mysterious way, he had ignited the hope in their hearts that the promised day had arrived, the fullness of time was at hand. The Redeemer had come and his reign would be "forever and ever".

This deep Messianic Hope lingered also in the hearts of his tormentors. They, too, prayed for Israel's Messiah to come. Surely, somewhere in the back of their minds, the hope existed that his claim was authentic. Surely, even as they sentenced him to death, they must have hoped that God would send legions of angels to vindicate him. There is apathetic hope disguised in their jeer - "If you are the savior, save yourself!" It is obvious that Judas was motivated in what he did by a desire to provoke God to show his power.

The crucifixion, then, objectively, looms in all its terrible finality as an illustration that God - if he exists at all - is quite powerless to intercede in the affairs of men. In that event God was denied, God was rejected, God was defeated. That is how logic would have it.

In a novel (Bevis, The Story of a Boy, Richard Jeffries - in J.W. Whale's Christian Doctrine) - a young boy looks at a picture of the crucifixion and is deeply affected by the scene - the spear and thorns and cruel nails. In righteous indignation he says: "If God were there - he wouldn't have let them do it."

That is the basic incongruity of calvary. For God was not only there - the Christian faith has the audacity to claim that it was his intent, his will, for things to happen like this; that he willingly sacrificed the life of Jesus Christ for the sake of men. For the Christian the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is not the demise of God at all, but his ultimate revelation. Some men look for God in the starry grandeur of the heavens: others seek him in the magnificence of the storm: still others search in the serenity and beauty of a mountaintop. But the Christian - when he looks for his God - focusses on a cross. Certainly he knows God as the creator, the life-giving spirit of all nature. But he begins with the cross. That is God. That is what he is like. That is how much he loves his world and his children. That is how far he will go for the sake of men, for the sake of compelling all men to come to him.

I believe it was Frederick Nietsche, an avowed despiser of Christianity, who remarked that he doubted whether many professing Christians had ever realized the significance of the statement -"God on a Cross". Realizing the significance of that: confronting the incongruity of calvary at this level, is basic to the Christian faith. If I had to designate the point at which my personal struggles and doubts finally fell into place, it would be that day when I realized that the crucifixion is not so much the story of what men did to Jesus Christ, as it is the story of what God has done for man.

How, then, do we respond to the crucifixion? I think we would be guilty of a serious presumption to confine our response to an academic understanding. I don't know that we can fully "understand". John Milton celebrated the birth of Jesus in a beautiful poem: "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity", but a companion piece on the crucifixion remains incomplete in his published works, along with a note which reads: "This subject the author finds to be above the years he had when he wrote it, and nothing satisfied with what was begun, left it unfinfished."

If I could presume to borrow the words of John Milton, I would say that, too. We have spent some time thinking about the incongruities of calvary, and as we conclude it is left unfinished.

You and I are left without understanding, but perhaps that is not nearly as important as "standing under" the cross. We know this much: there are incongruities about our lives. There is much about life that is paradoxical and inconsistent: there is much in our experience that is neither all good nor all bad but a little of both. We know there is no relevance, no redeeming power, in a gospel that fails to confront the ambiguity of life.

Our lives are patch-work quilts of suffering and joy, happiness and unhappiness, goodness and evil. There are incongruities about your life and my life. And right down in the middle of it all - not on some remote heavenly stage - but in the middle of the baffling enigma of life we confront a cross. It meets us where we are: it transcends time and space and intimately involves you and me. It is in this cross that we have our dignity: it is in this cross that we dare to entertain the notion that God cares about us. It is in the humble, dying figure there that we experience the saving power of our Lord.

May we take our stand, today and every day, beneath this cross.

Amen.